

# THE TROUBLE WITH WOMEN

As the movie of the best-selling novel 'Waiting to Exhale' opens, author Terry McMillan takes a deep breath and looks inward

**A**S MUCH AS I'm grateful for the success of *Waiting to Exhale*, a book about four female friends searching for love and happiness, I wish I hadn't found it necessary to write it. I wish that I and all my girlfriends and women in general were happy as little larks with our careers, love lives, children and family, and that our major complaints or areas of discontent might lie elsewhere, someplace more shallow or insignificant.

There are folks out there who still believe I made too much of being a woman in the '90s without a companion or love. There are people who criticized me for creating women whose lives revolved around men or the lack of them.

Of course, I disagree with my critics. What I did was allow these women to air their grievances, their pain, their angst, and articulate what it is they really want. I still don't find anything embarrassing about wanting a little affection, a kiss every now and then and a good love life. The irony is this: In the '90s, even though a kiss and sex are still pretty easy to come by, finding "a soul mate, or someone else who gets this drift" as Alanis Morissette would say, is hard. Someone you click with, mesh with — finding that person is getting tougher.

**I**'VE GIVEN ALL THIS a lot of thought, and I think I've kind of figured out why *Waiting to Exhale* touched so many women, and why it's gotten so tough for smart, intelligent, conscientious women in particular: We want too much.

We want it all. We want everything. But what we really want is perfection. From everything and everybody. From ourselves. From him. We are waiting and praying for that knight on that stupid horse. Yes, we want to feel like Cleopatra and Rapunzel and Juliet and (go on and admit it) a little bit like Madonna and Mary Poppins all together. We want to be rich. Or famous. Or prettier. Sexier. Smarter than ever. We want to be important. We want to matter. To

make a difference. We want to stay young. We want to be adored — worshiped, when you get right down to it — want to be the most amazing lover he ever had. And we want to always make the right decisions.

We also want power. To be in control of pretty much everything. We like being in the driver's seat. We don't seem to like being vulnerable anymore, and we do everything we can to pretend we're not. These past few years, women seem to abhor it when, strong for so long, we find ourselves breaking down and "acting like

**BY TERRY  
McMILLAN**

a woman." We hate the theatrics of being weak, being labeled a Wussy Wimpy Woman. We detest acting like those handmaidens from the Donna Reed era: dependent upon men, can't see past the front yard or the grocery store. Willing to do anything to get along, so utterly passive, relinquishing our own desires and needs for his or the children's. But look at us! We're still doing it. Because we want it both ways. We want to be out of the house but be *in* the house, too.

**B**UT, YOU KNOW, it's not easy wanting to have-it-all-both-ways-and-always-be-in-control. And most women I know are tired. Tired of searching. Trying to do it all and feeling as if nobody really gives a

damn if we do or don't. We're tired of not being appreciated. Tired of nobody saying, "You did good!" or "You're beautiful" or "You're my angel!" Tired of always being in rush hour. Trying to keep up with the speed of the information highway. Running on high octane with hardly any time to sit down and read a good book. Spend one-on-one time with our children. And how about an hour or two a day on ourselves? May we be struck down for being so selfish.

We're especially tired of searching for love. Which is one reason so many women feel like Newt Gingrich and Rush Limbaugh: cynical. It's hard to see the good in anything when you're not feeling good inside.

I've recently experienced all this myself, both pro-

fessionally and personally, and it has given me more insight into myself, and women today, than I got from writing the book itself.

After *Waiting to Exhale* was published in 1992, I became rich and famous in a matter of weeks. I was happy at first. It felt surreal, like living inside someone else's dream. People liked what I had done. I felt appreciated, respected. I had my 15 minutes of fame, and I thought: Well, I've got it all, now I can be content.

Wrong.

It's unreal how your life can change because of one thing you do that catapults you into the public eye. Thousands of people suddenly want things from you, especially your time and money, particularly friends, relatives and every charitable organization you can think of. Nowadays when I open my mouth in public, it's as if E.F. Hutton were speaking. But I don't have the answers. I'm just as human as the next person. But it seems the more you have, the more people



'Waiting to Exhale': Four women tackle an obstacle course of husbands, lovers, jobs and makeovers.



Terry McMillan's new novel, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, is due next spring. Her novel *Disappearing Acts* will be a movie next year.



# TURNING POINTS IN WOMEN'S LIVES

**Terry McMillan (author):**

**Q: What is the biggest challenge for women today?** Maintaining integrity and juggling family, career and love life.

**Q: How do you cope with fame?** Not think about it. I don't walk around with a halo over my head as if I'm so celebrated. I'm a mom, I car-pool, I go to the grocery store three times a week, I cook dinner, I wash clothes. I do what everybody else does. So you don't walk around thinking, "Gee, I'm famous."

**Q: What was the turning point in your life?** When I stopped drinking 12 years ago. It helped me realize that I had more control and power over my own existence and the direction I wanted my life to go, but that I just had to learn how to say no to things that weren't good for me. And once I said no, I found out that it really wasn't that hard. So I started saying no to everything that was bad for me.

**Whitney Houston**

(who plays Savannah in the movie)

**Q: What is the biggest challenge for women today?** For me, independence.

**Q: How do you cope with fame?** Carefully and patiently.

**Q: What was the turning point in your life?** When I turned 29. [She's 32.]

**Loretta Devine (Gloria):**

**Q: What is the biggest challenge for women today?** Staying healthy, happy and in tune with the life she has created.

**Q: How do you cope with fame?** I don't feel famous yet. Things are changing, however. Everything takes more time. You've got to stop and say hello and sign things for well-wishers and keep smiling. *Eek!* So you've got to get up early.

**Q: What was the turning point in your life?** I've been a working actress a long time. *Dreamgirls* changed my life, but so have some of the regional plays. I feel everything is yet to come. It feels much bigger than I ever dreamed. So *Exhale* is definitely a turning point for the better.

— Gayle Jo Carter

**Lela Rochon (Robin):**

**Q: What is the biggest challenge for women today?** To remain confident and to have self-esteem and self-respect. You have to stand up for yourself and say, "I won't allow you to do this to me."

**Q: How do you cope with fame?** All of this is very new to me, and right now it's very exciting, but I'm sure there will come a time when I won't enjoy it.

**Q: What was the turning point in your life?** After my home was destroyed after the ['94] earthquake. I was having a really hard year and a really difficult time getting work; three projects I was set to do fell through, and just everything that could go wrong did go wrong. My hair was falling out in spots — it was bad! It brought me ... where? On my knees, to God. It's that saying that sometimes bad things have to happen to you so you'll call on him. I've been very prayerful, very positive. I started over, and my life has been just one whirlwind experience since.

**Angela Bassett (Bernadine):**

**Q: What is the biggest challenge for women today?** I won't presume to speak for all women. But my challenge is balancing the professional and personal in such a way that they both flourish.

**Q: How do you cope with fame?** With humility and grace.

**Q: What was the turning point in your life?** Education has been the turning point. Education is the foundation for achievement.

want, the more they need. You wish you could pay that kid's lawyer's bills. You wish you could get treatment for all those teenage crack mothers in East Oakland. But you

find you can't be everything to everybody, at least not and be anything to yourself.

Then in 1993 my mother, who was only 59 years old, died unexpectedly when I was in Rome. This knocked the wind out of me. The following year — almost to the day — my best friend died of liver cancer. I didn't even know she was sick until a few weeks before she passed away. For the past two years, I've been pretty numb. I couldn't write anything with my heart in it for the longest time. Had nothing to say because I could feel only my own sense of loss, and it wasn't something I felt like sharing. I was trying to be strong.

There were times when I wished I'd never written *Waiting to Exhale*, that nobody knew who I was, that I could just fall in love with the damn UPS man or the Fed Ex man and drive my Landcruiser and do dried

**'We need to enjoy the moment. Smile more. Listen to what others have to say, and listen with our hearts. So what if they get broken?'**

flower arrangements or maybe run a bakery and — to appease my conscience and my heart — work with gang members, maybe teaching them the power of words in books, how to read and write.

I would also like to get another dog, maybe adopt a couple of kids so I'd still feel necessary and could give all this love to someone else since my son's getting older and doesn't like to be hugged as much as he used to. But all that's a fantasy, up there on the left side of my brain with the if-I-could've-I-would've's.

The deaths of my mother and best friend pulled me up short. That loss is hard and permanent. I miss my Mama. I miss Doris. But this past summer I crossed over the finish line of mourning. I gave myself permission to take a long-overdue vacation and somehow started filling up again, restarted my engine. Most of all, I lightened up. On myself.

**SO THIS IS WHAT** I've figured out: We women need to stop taking ourselves so seriously 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We need to put our foot our mouth more. Stick our necks out all the way. Enjoy the moment. Smile more. Listen to what others have to say, and listen with our hearts. So what if they get broken? We're resilient. We always have been able to pick ourselves up and keep right on steppin'.

Most of all, I'm learning to be happy with what I've got and who I am. Let me be clear: I don't regret my success, or the money or the appreciation of so many readers; I've just realized that the external stuff — or the lack of it — isn't what defines or determines my life. And it shouldn't define or determine yours.

I've realized that I've got everything I need inside me; we all do. I just happen to write for a living, and at this point in my life I wouldn't have it any other way. I like doing what I do, because nobody tells me how to do it. Writing a novel affects my life, alters it in some positive way so that if I don't solve any problems, I at least understand them better. I have made myself cognizant of them. I have embraced them, tried to tackle them head-on, and they're almost always issues that deal with the survival of the human spirit. Why we do what we do. Why we feel what we feel. Why we hurt. What happens when we hate, love or disappoint.

I question things I can't answer. I lie but try to tell the truth. I can be anybody or anywhere I want to be. I can fake it. I can relive, reminisce, remember, forget, pretend, but mostly embellish. I can resurrect myself and other people's lives. I can get my strenght' back. I can get back what I think I've lost or find wh. I'm hoping, praying, looking for. Which is mostly a clearing. One clearing after another. I just want to move through the brush and see the sky. ☐

Cont'd f.p.4

Respan? to Waiting to Exhale

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# Instead of simply skewering men, women should tell them what they want

By Pamela Hill Nettleton

I, for one, am not waiting to exhale. Terry McMillan's book and the film on which it is based, "Waiting to Exhale," were embraced by women, critics and even Oprah as a long-overdue and, apparently, much-appreciated bit of male-bashing.

The female-uplifting part of the script is fine: Women should celebrate their lives, with or without men in them; married women shouldn't treat single women like pariahs; women should remember the strength of female companionship, and women should stop looking for the Meaning of Life in boyfriends. These things are true. They are not news, but they are true.

It's the male-bashing part of the plot to which I'd like to add an appendix. Whoa, now, don't get excited, ladies — I'm not about to be politically incorrect here and suggest that men, too, might be bright, happy human beings who long to find a perfect mate. I admit that guys tend to be chromosomally disadvantaged. I

key about guys getting the heat treated

realize that, on the path to developing values and a conscience, they face stiffer challenges than those of us with uteri. And, I concede that many of them have a predictable tendency to blow their own lives up with rather silly behavior. I've dated guys, I've married guys, I've divorced guys and I'm raising guys. I know they are frustrating, but I also know they are frustrated. Rather than skewering them — their bumbling makes them such easy targets, it's really not good sport. I suggest that women take a bold, new tack and tell them what we want. Why the heck not? Nothing else is working.

So hang this on the refrigerator (or better yet, tuck it inside the Reader's Digest in the bathroom) and let me know if he reads it.

**How to impress a woman who is waiting to exhale:** Relax, men. When it comes to choosing a mate, women don't go for abs of steel, sports cars from Italy or checkbooks with lots of zeros. Nerds who got good grades in school and took home-ec so

they'd know how to fry an egg have a definite edge. Go grocery shopping. Write the list yourself. If you like Hell-man's and she likes Miracle Whip, buy both. When you get home, unpack and put away the food without ever once calling out "Honey, where do we keep the butter?"

When she's looking through a catalog, stop on the page with that red Oscar de la Renta suit, and sighs, you rip out the page, order it from the car phone and give it to her next week just because it's a Wednesday.

Say to your 15-year-old stepson: "Hey kid, come here. I'm going to teach you how to iron a dress shirt."

Buy her a tape of "An Affair to Remember," watch it with her, and stifle your urge to yell at the ending. "I don't get it! Why didn't she just call him up and tell him she got hit by a car and paralyzed?"

When you introduce her to your friends, beam proudly. Practice this in front of a mirror if you need to, but beam.

Find work and hobbies that make you feel proud of yourself. Do the laundry. Now, do it again, washing the reds and whites separately this time. Hold the door open for her, and when she walks through it under your arm, kiss her on top of her head. Leaf through her fashion magazines while saying, "Women who are this thin are just not attractive!" — even if you brag about her loudly.

somewhere where she can accidentally overhear you. At the dinner table, announce that you'll be driving the kids to hockey, band and dance lessons tonight and Mom will be left to her own devices.

The next time you catch her eye from across the room, wiggle your eyebrows. Show her children (and yours) what a responsible, loving, honorable man looks like.

A word of hope: Every example on this list I took from my actual, living and breathing husband. Real men do exist, they are embarrassed by those Other Guys, and they would love a chance to knock the socks off a woman who would appreciate them. Give nice guys a chance.

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## No, baby, American women have not come a long way

By Lorelei Kraft

Park Rapids, Minn.

I am not a female suffering from "delusions." I am not "unstable," "psychotic" or "schizophrenic."

I was Minnesota's Business Woman of the Year in 1988. I was a delegate to the White House Conference on Small Business in Washington, D.C., in 1986. I was named one of Corporate Report Minnesota's Outstanding Women in Business in 1989.

But 10 years ago, in 1981, I was a divorced mother of two struggling with a small business. I made an appointment to meet with a traveling Small Business Administration representative about available loan programs. When I asked for an application, he rifled through his briefcase, then said, "I must have left that particular application in my motel room. Why don't you meet me there at 5 o'clock to fill it out?" It was clear what he meant.

I tell this story because, like Anita Hill, I did nothing about it at the time. Who'd have believed me, over a man who'd been with SBA for years? Ten years ago there was little redress for those humiliating (and frequent) experiences for women.

What would I do now, 10 years later, if this man was to be appointed head of the SBA? Would I have the courage to speak out, after watching Anita Hill's treatment?

*Let me try to make it easier for men to understand the social conditioning on females to keep their mouths shut.*

Reverse the roles — and imagine growing up as a male in a world where everyone who has power is female: the president, Supreme Court, Congress, governors, judges, police, legislators, doctors, dentists, lawyers, school administrators, clergy.

As a boy, you are taught in church that God is female, that only females who are like God can be clergy, and only girls are worthy enough to be altar girls. You learn in school that the only accomplishments that merit attention are women's, as history

books rarely mention men. You subtly begin to absorb the knowledge that males must not be worth as much as females because they have no power.

As you go through school, your female counselors steer you into the secondary positions; you can be the dental hygienist, but not the dentist. If you protest, you are told you are "unmanly" to want women's jobs. In this world, men earn 59 cents for every dollar women earn and rarely make it to the top, as the "glass ceiling" is firmly in place. Men — no matter how old or what their job — are still called "boys."

As a teacher, you are paid less than female colleagues with the same experience. You then start your own business — and are humiliated when

**Reverse roles and imagine growing up male in a world where all who have power are female.**

you have to get your wife's permission for a bank loan even though she doesn't need your permission. You buy insurance through your business, and are appalled when the policy is issued in your wife's name and you are listed with the children under "dependents."

You want a vasectomy, and have to appear before a committee of women doctors to beg for the right. You get divorced; the awarded child support is not enforced and you struggle to make ends meet. When you look to governmental agencies for help, it is often suggested that meetings continue in motel rooms.

At home, you learn you have no legal protection, as more men get battered in their homes every year than get married. You whisper with male friends about husbands who are being beaten, many by wives who are pillars of the community — but police won't interfere in "domestic dis-

putes." You watch men who press rape or sexual harassment charges get dragged through the mud until they become the ones on trial.

Not a pretty picture, is it? Yet all of the above happened to me and many women of Anita Hill's generation. These are *not* things that happen to men, which is why they cannot imagine the intimidating, fearful effect of society's long-term conditioning on women when they are treated like children and second-class citizens with little legal rights.

And so I remember in humiliation the "good" men over the years who told obscene jokes and described pornography and demanded sexual favors and didn't think as "just warm-blooded males" they were doing anything wrong.

I feel again the utter frustration and anger of having to battle for rights men automatically had. I had not even heard of the word "feminist." I only knew that the discrimination *wasn't right* because I was a human being first and a female second.

Why should Anita Hill have battled the system 10 years ago? The crucifying she suffered in 1991 ("psychotic," "fantasizing," "unstable") by the all-male Judiciary Committee was exactly what she would have faced in 1981. The good old boys of the "kinder, gentler" White House protected their own with a smear campaign of sound-bite character assassination worthy of the defense in any rape trial — which is what prevents many women from coming forward.

And my anger starts to grow again, as I read study after study showing that girls today still have low self-esteem compared with boys. Society is continuing to teach little girls the same things about their lack of value and power that my generation was taught, and women in the workplace are still suffering discrimination in pay, promotion and harassment.

No, baby, we have not come a long way.

*Lorelei Kraft, of Park Rapids, is the owner of Lorelei Studios, a candle manufacturing firm.*

## THE RULES OF COURTLY LOVE

Love is a certain inborn suffering derived from the sight of and excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex, which causes each one to wish above all things the embraces of the other and by common desire to carry out all of love's precepts in the other's embraces.

1. Marriage is no real excuse for not loving.
2. He who is not jealous cannot love.
3. No one can be bound by a double love.
4. It is well known that love is always increasing or decreasing.
5. That which a lover takes against the will of his beloved has no relish.
6. Boys do not love until they arrive at the age of maturity.
7. When one lover dies, a widowhood of two years is required of the survivor.
8. No one should be deprived of love without the very best of reasons.
9. No one can love unless he is impelled by the persuasion of love.
10. Love is always a stranger in the home of avarice.
11. It is not proper to love any woman whom one would be ashamed to seek to marry.
12. A true lover does not desire to embrace in love anyone except his beloved.
13. When made public, love rarely endures.
14. The easy attainment of love makes it of little value: difficulty of attainment makes it prized.
15. Every lover regularly turns pale in the presence of his beloved.
16. When a lover suddenly catches sight of his beloved, his heart palpitates.
17. A new love puts to flight an old one.
18. Good character alone makes any man worthy of love.
19. If love diminishes, it quickly fails and rarely revives.
20. A man in love is always apprehensive.
21. Real jealousy always increases the feeling of love.
22. Jealousy, and therefore love, are increased when one suspects his beloved.
23. He whom the thought of love vexes eats and sleeps very little.
24. Every act of a lover ends in the thought of his beloved.
25. A true lover considers nothing good except what he thinks will please his beloved.
26. Love can deny nothing to love.
27. A lover can never have enough of the solaces of his beloved.
28. A slight presumption causes a lover to suspect his beloved.
29. A man who is vexed by too much passion usually does not love.
30. A true lover is constantly and without intermission possessed by the thought of his beloved.
31. Nothing forbids one woman being loved by two men or one man by two women.

# Why Do We Need to Genderize? Women's Literature in High School

DELANE BENDER SLACK

I have been teaching secondary English for seven years. I have taken various literature courses for the past twenty years. I attended an all girls high school. Only in my upper-level undergraduate courses and my graduate courses did I ever read texts written by women and/or with female protagonists. In grade school, I learned about the universal "he"—you know, if you are unsure of the gender of your subject, always refer to him/her as "him" or "he." I remember asking why and being told, "That's just the rule." Accepting that explanation has created a crisis for all women. "...a crisis that centers on her [woman's] struggle to disentangle her voice from the voices of others and to find a language that represents her experience of relationships and her sense of herself" (Gilligan 51).

## A Course Is Born

As the school year ended in June of 1997, I was told I would teach any open twelfth grade English classes the following year. I had not taught upper-level students since my student teaching experience several years earlier, and I wanted to try a higher level English class. There were only two senior English teachers at the time, and with the numbers of students in our district multiplying at a dizzying rate, one more would be needed.

Ultimately, the plans for a new class did not materialize. Knowing I would be disappointed, my principal assured me that I was next in line when ever an upper level class developed. He suggested that the English department look into electives and other student choices, specifically mentioning a women's literature course. Suddenly, I reversed this man. Noting my enthusiasm, he proposed, "You write it, you teach it."

This mission caused me to recall some work in my classroom a few years prior: when I taught a

throughout our schools' curricula, textbooks, and instruction. It was a web I was all too familiar with as a student and—I hate to admit it—as a teacher.

I found a strong resonance in Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* as she recognized the difference—and the value—in the relational voice of women. I was empowered by her challenge of the traditionally accepted and respected psychological theory. Because I, too, want to be an advocate for women, a voice among the voiceless, someone who strives to make a difference in the lives I touch, I wanted to create a women's literature curriculum. I wanted to give my students female role models and celebrate accomplished women writers.

So I went to work. I read profusely, works ranging from Chopin to Eudrich, Brontë to Kingston. I dug through old class notes and texts from women's and ethnicity courses. I reread Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand*, and I was introduced to one of my most insightful texts—Toni Apter's *Working Women Don't Have Whores*. That specific text spoke to my personal challenge of being a superwoman. I read and reread all summer. I was intrigued by the way women were portrayed in well-respected fiction novels like *Madame Bovary*, *Bend Sin*, and *Kindred*. I became engrossed in nonfiction like *Women's Ways of Knowing* by Belenky, et al. and *Mary Pipher's Reviving Ophelia* because in these I clearly recognized myself and the women I know. I talked, I researched, I wrote. Following a basic college English syllabus I acquired in graduate school, I proposed a curriculum for the class. Upon returning to school in September, I distributed copies to my department chair and administrators and shared my work and enthusiasm with colleagues.

Male teachers in the building began grumbling about the injustice of a class with the word "women" in the title. They objected that it might teach only about women and/or appeal mostly to female students. I was dismayed by their reasoning. Their arguments and my response follow.

If we offer a women's literature course, then we should offer a men's literature course.

The majority of our established English curriculum already consists of "men's literature," so it will not be underrepresented in our high school curricula. Furthermore, condemning a women's literature course because it is not balanced by a men's literature course implies that all things are equal. However, from the early years of schooling/socialization,

we know this is not the case. Girls' struggles range from low self-esteem, eating disorders, anxiety, and depression to sexual harassment, teen pregnancy, sexual coercion, and sexual assault. In her book *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan tells us, "Girls' initiation or passage into adulthood in a world psychologically rooted and historically anchored in the experiences of powerful men marks the beginning of self-doubt and the dawning of realization, no matter how fleeting, that womanhood will require a dissociative split between experience and what is generally taken to be reality" (xvi). The true voices are lost.

Male teachers in the building began grumbling about the injustice of a class with the word "women" in the title.

While some would not agree that it is more difficult to grow up female in our society, a study by the Sadlers indicates otherwise. When asked what the difference would be if students were forced to switch genders, boys reacted violently, threatening self-mutilation or suicide. "For boys the thought of being female is appalling, disgusting, and humiliating; it is completely unacceptable" (Sadler and Sadler 83). In fact, 95 percent of the boys surveyed could not find one advantage to being female (Sadler and Sadler 84)—all the more reason to study women in literature.

Few boys will want to sign up for this course.

The challenge will be in "selling" the course to them. As teachers and parents, we need to raise a generation of boys and men who can admire and appreciate women. The fact is that each will be working with or for women. We are doing our male students a great disservice by allowing male dominated texts and ideas to pervade our classrooms. They no longer accurately reflect what is happening in society or teach the skills boys will need to be successful. As the Sadlers point out:

Boys cannot develop these repressed parts of themselves [endurance, nurturance, the skills of cooperation, the desire for connection] without abandoning attitudes that degrade girls. Until gender equity becomes a value promoted in every aspect of school boys, as victims of their own maleducation, will grow up to be troubled men; they will be saddled by unmet expectations, unable to communicate with women as equals, and unprepared for modern life. (225)

### A women's literature course will service only 50 percent of the population.

Following that line of reasoning, our male-centered curricula has been servicing only 50 percent of the population for years. Aren't we ready for a change? With a focus not just on women's issues and literature, but including a study of the language of both genders, this class can appeal to all students. If, however, the class is predominantly or completely female, the objectives can still be met. In fact, since it is our goal to encourage all students to master the English language through writing, reading, and speaking, curriculum and teacher instruction must change. According to the Sadlers, "Male students control classroom conversation. They ask and answer more questions. They receive more praise for the intellectual quality of their ideas. They get criticized. They get help when they are confused. They are the heart and center of interaction" (42). This being true, an English class that consists of a greater percentage of females may actually improve teacher instruction. For example, the teacher, female or male, may place a greater value on "women's talk." According to Belenky et al., "Women's talk, in both style (hesitant, qualified, question-posing) and content (concern for the everyday, the practical, and the interpersonal) is typically devalued by men and women alike. Women talk less in mixed groups and are interrupted more often" (17-18). Males may learn to appreciate the value of typically "female" communication. Giving female students a place to use their voice will give them power to use it outside of school and after graduation.

We shouldn't give students a choice between American literature and women's literature. Belenky et al. tell us that "women, paddling in the bywaters of the culture, have had little to do with posing the questions or designing the agendas of the disciplines" (198). Such is true in our literature.

As the Sadlers point out "Each time a girl opens a book and reads a womanless history, she learns she is worth less." The voices of women, minorities, the poor, and the uneducated (voices that have not been heard until recently) are a vital part of the "True" American experience. The danger is that in leaning them out, the perception of what they have contributed to our society becomes warped. The Sadlers tell us that it was "clear that when women were left out of the curriculum, the students know nothing about them. Even worse, without real knowledge, the children filled in the gaps with stereotypes and distortions. The result was a twisted view of half the people and their history" (73). What many of us learned in history classes in the past few decades was biased—only showing us half of what was happening. Fitzgerald? Salinger? Steinbeck? They don't speak for me. They don't speak of me. They don't speak to me.

### Why not integrate more female authors/protagonists into the current curriculum?

Which authors would we sacrifice? There is much resistance from parents, community members, teachers, and educational institutions to dispensing with the "classics," yet traditional male-dominated classic literature is no longer the key to most university English programs, especially for those students who are not literature majors. Research shows that boys are averse to reading "chick" books, while girls are more tolerant about reading "male" books because they have been conditioned to do so. If the traditional curriculum actually does appeal to boys, shouldn't we have generations of men who are avid readers?

### Results of the Debate

Regardless of the debate, the English department, predominantly female, voted on women's literature as our top choice for an elective. That is what we planned to present to the board of education. Before the meeting, however, we met with a male English teacher, who voiced an interest in teaching the course, to revise the curriculum in order to make it "male-friendly." The goal was to delete any work/ideas that might be interpreted negatively:

- Remove the word *gender* from the curriculum completely. That indicates feminism.

- Delete the word *empower*. Men will find it threatening.
  - Eliminate any assignment that has an objective of identifying gender stereotypes. It will be perceived as male-bashing.
- Reluctantly we made the suggested changes.

Though told by many that the course would never fly, we were cautiously optimistic. The course made too much sense. We had gone through the proper channels within the building. We had followed all of the necessary and logical steps. As one more precaution, however, before we presented the proposal to the board, we decided to submit it with other course changes. At the time we offered English III (American literature), English IV (British literature), or world literature. World literature had already become multicultural literature because of the progressive spirit of the teacher, so we decided we would have a better chance of getting a women's literature course by offering it as a core choice while changes were being made. Women's literature, from our perspective, was equally as important as multicultural literature; therefore, we presented the following choices for juniors and seniors: American literature, British literature, women's literature, and multicultural literature. Students would be required to take two of the four, any of which would satisfy credits for graduation. It was ideal. If nobody was interested in a particular class, no one would sign up, and it would die. Improving our chances further, we believed, ours was the only department not asking for additional funding. We required no additional personnel or new textbooks.

Each department chair attended the board meeting to present proposed course changes and electives. We talked beforehand about having the entire English department attend the meeting to answer questions and show our support of the class. Since the other departments were sending only one spokesperson, the department chair, we thought it unnecessary to "make a show of it." We decided to follow the given format. It should appear there was no reason we would have to go out of our way to initiate this class.

At the board meeting, my department chair proposed the changes, and not one concern was brought up, not one question asked. Although some of the board members averted their eyes as she talked, she was still hopeful. After the open session ended, she approached the one female board member to garner support. The woman

spoke of her approval of the course but warned it would not be an easy battle. The doors closed on the executive session.

The goal was to delete any words/ideas that might be interpreted negatively.

We have no way of knowing what went on behind those doors. We only know the outcome. Multicultural literature was accepted while women's literature was rejected *without one school board member ever reading the course curriculum or afterwards giving us a rationale*. The call came to my principal, who, in turn, passed it down the chain. We exploded in private—anger, tears, disbelief, frustration, disappointment, rage. Rage about the injustice done to women once again—young women who have already been bombarded with the message that they are second-class citizens—a message reinforced in the workplace by lower salaries, fewer promotions, unheard voices, and little respect.

### Moving Forward

Where do we go from here? We must speak up. Gilligan tells us that "by restricting their voices, many women are writing or unwritingly perpetuating a male-voiced civilization and an order of living that is founded on disconnection from women" (21). We must refuse to perpetuate that. Our voices cannot be restricted. First, we'll educate. We have plans to bring in a speaker on gender and curriculum. We have plans to improve dealings with sexual harassment. Sensitivity training. Staff required readings. Self-defense classes. As an English department, we are re-empowering our entire curriculum. Evet Fitzgerald! Dispose of Golding! Make room for Austen! Welcome home, Morrison! Make our class a gender balance in our selections now, but a women's literature course is necessary until all grade levels in every district do the same. Only then, when those children have been exposed to an equal representation for the first eight years of their schooling, will the course no longer be as ne-



essay. Once women are equal in the media, government, and society, the women's literature course can become extinct. But for now, for next spring, we will resubmit the proposal.

And if that fails? Personally, I am redesigning what I do in the classroom through discussions, the study of nonsexist language, journal prompts, new novels, more female authors. I am analyzing my own instruction to avoid gender bias. My class will be less competitive and more collaborative. I will strive not to "underestimate the intelligence of girls . . . [because] These perceptions persist throughout every level of education and are transmitted to the children" (Sadker and Sadker 95). I will give them more time to think. I am working to raise the awareness of boys and girls alike who may never have a chance to take the course on which I worked so diligently. As a parent, I am more conscious of gender stereotypes in the home. When my daughter and I sing "Old MacDonald," the animals are on *her* farm. Women are to be respected, accepted, and appreciated. My students and my daughter will get that message—one way or another.

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#### EJ 20 YEARS AGO

#### Practicing a Lost Art

"Students need constant exposure to the fullness and richness of the English language. If they don't get it from their teachers, where can they turn? Certainly not to the mass media, which reduce everything to a lowest common denominator. Reading aloud is becoming a lost art, but it is one sure way of exposing young people to materials beyond their apparent reading level. The instructor's own lectures and informal conversation should be stuffed like a Christmas cake with semantic goodies. Don't be afraid to let them know that somebody speaks in words of more than two syllables!"

Peggy Flynas. "A Love Affair With Words." *EJ* 69.5 (1979): 62

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#### EJ 50 YEARS AGO

#### Reading in the Atomic Age

"Atomic bombs do not make for quiet, restful reading. Wars and rumors of war, riots in Palestine, disagreements among foreign ministers, trouble in China, and strikes in France—all these evidences of a sick, feverish world prevent the average reader, whether he realizes it or not, from taking life easy and relaxing with a good book. His grandfather may have been able to find escape from the difficulties of the nineteenth-century world in the leisurely pages of Dickens or Thackeray or Trollope. Today the cries of the world are too shrill, the demands for attention too insistent, for the reader to bury himself completely in serious literature."

Mervin Maglaner. "Fritfalls in Modern Reading." *EJ* 38.1 (1949): 6-10

